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An Arms Lesson From History

By Joe Moakley

WASHINGTON — The Administration's decision last week to test its new anti-satellite weapon may result in a dangerous and irreversible arms race in space. If President Reagan is at all serious about arms control, he will postpone the proposed ASAT test — at least until after the Geneva summit meeting in November.

The military forces of both the United States and the Soviet Union have long relied on satellites for a variety of peaceful functions such as weather, navigation, early warning, treaty verification and reconnaissance. These functions are used to enhance mutual security and maintain peace.

Placing weapons in space that might threaten these satellites will raise rather than lower the chances of a devastating nuclear war on earth. With the central nervous systems of the immense superpower war machines already in orbit, just the existence — let alone the use — of such weapons will turn every computer malfunction and mechanical breakdown into a pretext for war.

We have been told by the Administration that the United States needs to go ahead with testing ASAT's because the Russians have also made rapid advances in ASAT technology. A brief review of the history of ASAT's shows that this argument is flawed.

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During the early 1960's the United States was the first nation to deploy an ASAT, which consisted of nuclear warheads. It was dismantled in 1975 when it became clear that a nuclear blast in space would not only destroy the weapon's target but also damage our own satellites. Since that time designers on both sides have attempted to make an ASAT that is more discriminating and sophisticated.

The Russians have been testing an ASAT since 1968. The Soviet weapon is ungainly and unreliable. It is launched atop a huge SS-9 rocket booster and has achieved a 50 percent success rate so far. The last Soviet test, in June 1982, was a failure. Most important, the Soviet weapon does not have the capacity to threaten crucial American military satellites.

Our ASAT will be superior to its Soviet counterpart. It is small enough to be carried aloft by a high-flying F-15 fighter plane. Once the missile is fired from the F-15, it is propelled by a two-stage rocket. The intended target is actually destroyed by a 12-by-13-inch canister, called a miniature homing vehicle, which simply rams the satellite at high speed. Unlike the Soviet weapon, this system can destroy essential enemy military satellites.

Because our ASAT is so small, the Russians will find it virtually impossible to determine whether we have deployed one or more ASAT's, even if we have signed a treaty not to do so. Every F-15 would become a potential ASAT platform in Soviet eyes. Thus, testing our ASAT to a point of operational readiness may well preclude the chance of a negotiated ban on these weapons, because the Russians would be unlikely to sign any agreement that could not be verfied.

The House of Representatives has passed an amendment calling for the United States to refrain from testing an ASAT against an object in space as long as the Russians do not conduct a comparable test. The Administration could greatly advance the cause of arms control by abiding by such a moratorium. A mutual moratorium on ASAT testing would slow the momentum of the arms race in space, as well as setting the stage for negotiations limiting such weapons. And a mutual ban on ASAT testing would not place the United States at any strategic disadvantage, since our technology in this area is so plainly superior to Moscow's.

We have an unusual opportunity to prevent a major extension of the arms race. But we must act now. History has shown that it is much more practical to ban weapons before they become operational. It would be sad to repeat the grievous error we committed more than a decade ago in endowing nuclear weapons with multiple independently targetable re-entry vehicles. At the time, proposals to ban MIRV's before their deployment were rejected because our defense strategists assured us that the Russians could not easily match our technology. But the Russians added MIRV's to their warheads only a few years after the United States did. Today, these destabilizing systems threaten all of humankind.

Let's learn from history. □